OF MICE & MENUS

WIMPS — windows, icons, mice and pointers — have been a part of the computing environment long enough for the initial excitement surrounding their introduction to have subsided. Microsoft's Gem and Apple's Mac have both proved the desirability of such systems, while at the same time setting the standard for those to follow.

WIMPS software offers a user-friendly front end which permits the operator to carry-out basic housekeeping tasks without having to resort to the computer operating system. Information is presented on the screen in the form of graphic icons. To carry-out a particular task, the user moves a pointer, usually controlled by a mouse, to the relevant icon and presses a button.

The theory behind WIMPS is that it should be simple enough to enable someone with little or no knowledge of the operating system to carry-out disc filing and other essential tasks. To that end, a parallel is drawn between using the computer and running an office. In addition to facilitating filing operations through the use of everyday symbols, extras such as a calculator, calendar and clock are often provided.

WIMPS, however, should not be regarded purely as an aid to the computer illiterate. It provides a useful tool for anybody wishing to carry-out what can often be tedious, mundane operations in a fast, convenient manner, which leads us neatly to the subject of the QL.

Given the popularity of the machine in business circles, combined with its cumbersome command syntax, it is perhaps surprising that it has taken until now for what can truly be called WIMPS to appear.

Eidersoft's Icon Control Environment made its first appearance in the latter part of last year. The addition of a professional-looking mouse will undoubtedly make it a more attractive option for those who wish to escape the tedium of SuperBasic file handling.

As well as the mouse Eidersoft are providing Their article graphics package. The mouse compatible software enables freehand designs to be created and features interchangeable brushes, block copying, geometric designs, area fill, and other useful functions.

The software for the mouse has been incorporated neatly into a ROM cartridge only slightly larger than the one which housed the original ICE. It protrudes about 3cm. from the ROM socket, trailing a metre of cable to which is attached the mouse. In operation, the mouse performs admirably, moving the pointer smoothly round the screen with no sign of flicker. Moving the mouse about 12cm. carries the pointer the width of the screen. It is therefore possible to operate the mouse on
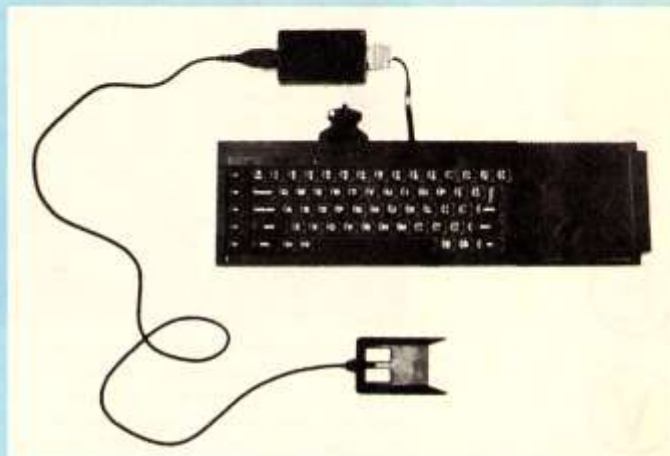
top of the QL Microdrive panel, although a desk-top would be preferable.

On power-up with the ICE ROM in place, the centre of the screen is occupied by the main window, with icons displayed in the border area to the left and bottom of the screen. They show the storage devices — microdrives, floppy and RAM discs — calculator, calendar, a bin for file deletions and an ESCape button.

Other functions are represented in text form on a bar across the bottom of the screen. They include options to re-name files, customise ICE parameters such as the mouse click repeat time, change the device names and set the system clock. While some of those functions are purely cosmetic, enabling users to tailor the software to their preference, most provide useful enhancements without you having to think too much about it. The clock, for example, date stamps each file directory entry whenever it is updated.

REVIEW

Until recently the preserve of machines like the Apple and Atari, Icon driven software and mice have now arrived on the QL.
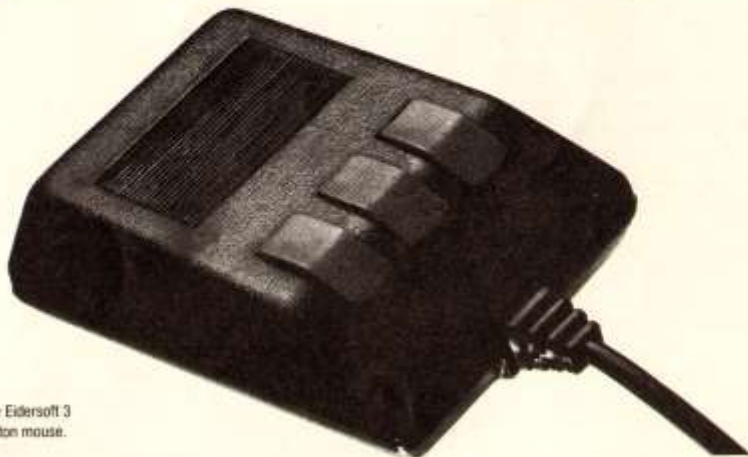

Moving the pointer to a device icon and clicking the right-hand button displays a directory in the main window. Different icons are used to distinguish between file types and if the directory is of more than 12 entries the remainder are displayed on subsequent pages. Once the directory has been loaded it is a simple matter to carry-out filing operations. The file on which you wish to work is highlighted by placing the pointer over it and single-clicking with the left button on the mouse; it then becomes the current file for all operations.

Performing the same operation on an active file causes it be become inactive. In that manner it is possible to select a number of files on which a single

The ABC alternative. Fewer buttons, but more bulk.

command can be performed. Both EXECutable files and SuperBasic programs can be run from within ICE by placing the pointer over the file and clicking the right-hand button. A more recent feature is the autoboot facility, which will allow you to load, for example, Quill, in the normal manner, with the ICE ROM present, thus preventing you having to go through the ICE routines.

connected in the same manner, are two more leads. One of them is the connection to CTRL1, the other takes power from the ROM socket.
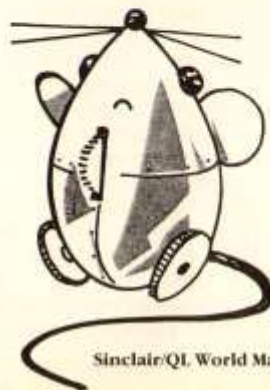
With the mouse connected and the QL switched-on, EASE boots-up in the usual way. Icons are displayed on the right of the screen and the pull-down menu bars across the top. EASE is very much more window- and menu-orientated than ICE. It is possible to exercise

The Eidersoft 3
button mouse.

There are a number of facilities in addition to the general housekeeping functions. The view option, selected from the menu bar, outputs the contents of an active file to a small window. Because of the limitation of the small window size, it is possible to examine only a small part of the file at any time. The complete thing can be viewed section by section, using the MORE button, and output to the printer is obtained in the same manner. It is difficult to see how this facility could be of great use, other than to examine SuperBasic listings or files created using the Psion packages. In either case a more acceptable output could probably be obtained in the conventional manner.

Of similarly dubious value is the calculator. While ease of operation is considerably improved by the presence of the mouse — the pointer is positioned over the relevant keys and input is displayed on the imitation LED screen — I cannot imagine anyone wanting to use it in preference to the genuine article. More useful is the calendar. As well as providing information for the date-stamping of updated files, it is possible to page back and forth through the months and check on particular day/date combinations.

The only other mouse-driven, icon-based system which could be described realistically as an ICE alternative is the ABC Electronic EASE, or Easily Applicable System Environment. The complete package comprises the mouse; EASE software on Microdrive; and Giga-Basic, a SuperBasic extension.

The first thing to strike one about the hardware is its ungainly appearance. The two-button mouse is neat enough — about the size of a cigarette packet and raised at the rear — but the method of connection is extremely messy. The lead terminates in a D-plug which fits into one end of the interface, a black box about the same size as the mouse. At the other end,

greater control over how information is presented, although that is not necessarily desirable.

Working upwards from the bottom of the screen, the final three icons represent storage devices — the two Microdrives and a third device which can be configured by the user. Moving the pointer over the disc symbol and clicking provides an icon-based directory window. Up to seven window directories can be displayed simultaneously and therefore it is possible to examine the contents of several devices without clearing the screen.

With so many windows on the screen, things may become confusing and the EASE dustbin performs the function of closing the topmost window. It is not used to delete files, as that function is provided on a pull-down menu.
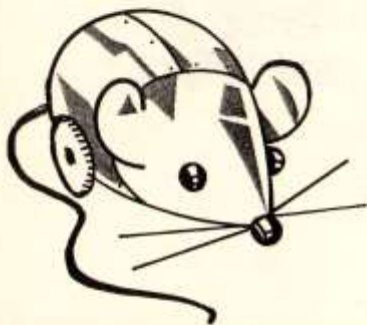
The remaining icons are all concerned with the manipulation of windows on the screen. The duplicator allows a copy of the window to be displayed on another part of the screen, so that separate parts of the page can be worked on simultaneously. Windows can be

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OF MICE & MENUS

There is, however, no option to change the speed at which the pointer moves.

It is difficult to make a straightforward comparison of ICE and EASE as they differ, not only in individual aspects, but in their approach to the whole idea of desk-top systems. ICE has the edge in terms of available options and its structure is altogether tighter, making it easier for the novice to assimilate. Neither is there any question that the Eidersoft mouse is a superior product to its ABC counterpart.

EASE, on the other hand, has more flexible window facilities and will probably appeal more to those who prefer a greater degree of control over how their information if formatted on output. At 210DM, which is roughly £60, it is considerably cheaper than ICE, though a straight price comparison may not be totally relevant, depending on your preference for Extended Basic as against the ARTice graphics package.

ARTice. Mouse
Assisted Design.

enlarged or reduced and their contents scrolled in any direction. Therefore it is possible to have a page much bigger than the window through which it is viewed. Finally, the windows can be positioned anywhere within the screen area.

Just as icons are used exclusively for window commands, housekeeping operations are performed under control of Mac-style, pull-down menus. In all, there are five. Moving the pointer to the first, marked DESK, and clicking pulls down the menu. That particular menu offers the choice of a scientific function calculator or a sliding puzzle-type game. The other four menus have several more useful functions to call on, including file deletion and copying, formatting, sorting, and view.

Like ICE, EASE can be customised to suit your particular requirements. The default media can be switched from Microdrive to floppy discs, the scroll speed of the windows can be altered, as can the speed with which windows are moved about the screen.

Users with RAM expansions and disc drives will be tempted to opt for ICE, as it offers the possiblity of multi-tasking with the CHOice software which costs £14.95. That permits use of all four Psion packages — or any other EXECable programs — concurrently, provided you have adequate memory space, and allows switching between them.

Having used both systems, my preference is for ICE. Being ROM-based it is more convenient to use and it has all the facilities one could reasonably expect. When used in combination with the Choice software it transforms the QL into a powerful, multi-tasking workstation which is difficult to fault.

Eidersoft, The Office, Hall Farm, N. Ockendon, Upminster, Essex RM14 3QH. ICE, Mouse and ARTice £89.95 or £65 if an ICE Cartridge is traded in. CHOice multi-tasking software £14.95.

ABC Elektronic, Huegelstr 10-12, 4800 Belefeld 1, West Germany. Giga Soft Mouse, EASE and Giga-Basic 210DM ex postage.